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WHAT DID JESUS UNDERTAKE TO DO?

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I

The Romans, under whose procurator, Pontius Pilate, Jesus was put to death in the reign of Tiberius, got control of Palestine in 63 B.C., when Pompey intervened to stop a civil war which was harassing the people's life. The Roman sway was exercised over Judah and Samaria in the time of Jesus, through her procurator Pontius Pilate; over Galilee and the region beyond Jordan, through the vassal King Antipas (Herod).

The contemporaries of Jesus regarded this Roman dominion variously. In idea all resented it. The people of wealth and social position, for the most part, accepted and made the best of it. These people of wealth and position constituted the party of the Sadducees—a name probably derived from Zadok, who was high priest under King Solomon—for the aristocracy of Judaea consisted principally of the great high-priestly families, and their social and political followers. As the priestly party, the Sadducees were guardians of the temple and its ritual. How far that worship had fallen into formalism may be seen from the toleration extended by them to the market which energetic traders had set up within the temple itself—fornooth in order to make it easy for worshipers from a distance to procure fit animals for sacrifice and correct coins for money gifts. Circumstances also developed among the Sadducees some acute students of the Hebrew Scriptures. Such scribes were extreme literalists, and opposed any religious ideas which were not explicitly written in the Law.

That which more than anything else called out the intellectual activity of these Sadducean scribes, or teachers, was the great popularity of certain other teachers of the Law, who were known as the Pharisees. That name did not indeed designate a party

among the people, but rather a group or fraternity of highly educated men, who by their zeal for the Law, by their knowledge of the traditions of the elders, and by their punctilious observance of all religious requirements, were "separate" from the common people. Although these Pharisees were exceedingly zealous for the traditions, in some respects they were the progressives of their time, for they held to many doctrines which the Sadducees denied because not found specifically in the Mosaic Law. The central idea in Pharisaic thinking was the holiness of God. So holy did they conceive God to be that sinful man could make no approach into his presence. The Law was given to man "through angels" (Gal. 3:19). It contained the whole of God's revealed will, if only it was understood in the light of the traditions of the elders in which the application of the divine commands was made to all conceivable circumstances of daily life. It is not strange that such specific traditions practically meant more to many scribes than the very letter of the Law itself (see Mark 7:1-23), and religion became lost in a maze of hand washings, sabbath regulations, and rules concerning clean and unclean meats. For the fundamental doctrine of the unapproachable holiness of God tended to banish God from any living communion with his people.

In theory the Pharisees were strict theocrats, and hostile to any other sovereignty than God's. Practically however they concerned themselves little with political matters, acquiescing in the *status quo*, while they gave themselves to study and religious observances. This apparent indifference to matters political was the outgrowth of their firm faith that in his own good time and in his own way God would bring to pass the complete redemption of his people from all bondage.

This belief was *the Messianic Hope*. At its heart it was simply the corollary of faith in God's fidelity to the promises to Abraham and to his seed, which fidelity pledged him to set Israel on high in triumph over all their foes. That conviction had been the distinguishing characteristic of Israel's prophets and psalmists from the early times. It was dominant over the thought and over the life of the majority of Jesus' Palestinian contemporaries. This hope took on various forms. Some looked for God himself to come

and rule over his victorious people. Some believed that he would send a special representative—prophet or priest or king—as his Anointed One, to accomplish redemption for his people. The Pharisees for the most part, while sharing the messianic hope, gave less thought to it than to the ordering of their present life scrupulously in accordance with the Law and the traditions.

Not a few, who in general belief were in agreement with the Pharisees, gave to this hope of deliverance a much larger place in their thought. The evidence exists for us today in a varied apocalyptic literature, patterned after the visions of the Book of Daniel. The seers of such visions expected God's redemption to come with some great cataclysm, in which Israel's foes and all the wicked should be overwhelmed, while the kingdom of heaven, in which the Jews would be God's chief favorites, would be established in triumph.

Nor were all of the eagerly expectant people content to await God's sudden intervention for his people's deliverance. Some of them, known as Zealots, felt impelled to have a hand in hastening the day of that deliverance, by planning some armed revolt against the Roman dominion. It was such a revolt which precipitated the war which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.

All of these—Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots—constituted but a small part of the Jewish people. There remained the common people—despised by the Pharisees as not knowing the Law and, therefore, accursed. Too absorbed in the relentless tasks of daily life to take strong sides with any party, they yet followed for the most part the leadership of the Pharisees, revering the scribes as those that sat in Moses' seat. For scribal casuistry and scholastic quibbles, however, they had little interest or understanding—a simple people, with a simple faith, waiting for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25). Some, however, were more easily excited, and probably accepted the passionate Zealot teachings, particularly when some magnetic leader appeared among them.

II

Such were the people to whose ears came the message of the Voice crying in the wilderness, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven

is at hand." It was a prophet's voice, such as many had been eagerly awaiting for generations. It made no appeal to traditions and fine-spun interpretations. Rather the prophet spurned the idea cherished by not a few that God's promised kingdom was the assured possession of those in whose veins flowed Abraham's blood. Moreover, this prophet looked for a kingdom speedily coming with judgment: "the axe even now is laid at the root of the trees" (Luke 3:9); the harvester even now is winnowing his grain to separate out the chaff for burning. An urgent, pressing call it was, with a searching demand for righteousness, and summons to a baptism of repentance and consecration. Small wonder that multitudes of all sorts and of all shades of opinion flocked to the Jordan to hear, and to be baptized, confessing their sins.

Among those multitudes Jesus came from his carpenter's bench at Nazareth, intent on consecrating his life to the kingdom which John preached. And in his baptism there came to him the clear summons to devote his life to that kingdom, as God's chosen representative—not otherwise could he have understood the words which rang within his heart, "Thou art my Son." The withdrawal to the wilderness was inevitable. The temptation was a manifold suggestion to his spirit to doubt that divine call, or to follow it in the way all the men of his time would expect him to do. The victory he won was the victory of loyalty to his deep spiritual convictions and experience. Out from the wilderness he came and took up John's message, "Repent!" But a new note is present: Jesus' simple "I say unto you"; and a new teaching also appears: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation."

III

Summoned by such a call, tested by such a temptation, living among a people of such beliefs and expectations, what did Jesus undertake to do? Four things may be named as clear objects of his short and momentous public activity.

He undertook (1) to be obedient, even until death; (2) to preach the gospel of the kingdom; (3) to attach disciples to himself who could finish his work; and thus (4) to put leaven in the lump of this world's life, that the whole might be leavened.

1. He was obedient, even until death. The temptation which followed the baptism shows how hard a problem that call, "Thou art my Son," presented to him. To a Jew of Jesus' time such a call could mean but one thing—that he was to inaugurate God's kingdom. But his life, his experience of soul, his idea of God's truth and God's will had little in common with his people's messianic expectations. The outcome of the temptation was his calm determination to do his work as God should indicate that work to him, but always in perfect loyalty to his own conviction concerning God and God's will and the nature of God's kingdom. So he was obedient. That such obedience showed him far removed from the worldly Sadducees and their casuistic scribes did not signify, for in this all Pharisees and most of the common people would praise him. That his loyalty to his own spiritual certainty set him in opposition to Pharisaic scrupulousness in matters of hand washings, clean meats, sabbath regulations, and the like, was very serious however. Yet he did not hesitate to be true to his own inward certainty of God's will, nor to denounce the hypocrisy which made clean the outside of the platter, but was indifferent to inward spiritual ungodliness. Moreover that his idea of God's simple demand upon men's hearts led him to declare that the kingdom comes not with observation, as the apocalypses pictured, but is like unto leaven hid in the meal, an influence working quietly, slowly, unobserved—that brought him into open conflict with the most cherished hopes of the people. Nevertheless he was obedient—even until death.

This obedience was for him not simply his response to the divine voice speaking in his own conscience. It was essentially obedience to the teaching of the Scriptures of his people. His message and his work meant no innovation. "I came to fulfil," was his word. Yet in almost the next word he set his "I say unto you" over against that "which was said to them of old time." But his unsupported affirmation was the old law lifted to its spiritual limit; and the confirmation of his teaching was found in the response of enlightened consciences.

His obedience was an active response to the call of duty. Preaching, healing, inspiring now multitudes, now a select group, his meat was always to do the will of him that sent him and to finish his

work. At the darkest hours of his career he recognized the divine summons to go forward with his work—the Son of Man *must* suffer many things. And at the end Gethsemane saw his supreme obedience—“the cup which my father hath given me to drink, shall I not drink it?”

Early Christian thinking recognized the supreme significance of this enterprise of obedience: “*Wherefore* also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9).

2. He preached the gospel of the kingdom. His preaching was not like John’s, except in his demand for repentance and simple righteousness. “The axe laid at the roots of the trees” is wanting. The winnower, fan in hand, is absent. Instead we have the parable of the tares—“Let both grow together until the harvest, . . . lest haply while ye gather up the tares ye root up also the wheat with them” (Matt. 13:29). Rather is Jesus’ teaching first of all concerned with the true idea of God—as a Father, who sees in secret, and who will have his children to be perfect (Matt., chaps. 5 and 6); a Father who waits eagerly to receive and forgive penitent prodigals (Luke 15:11–24). Jesus’ doctrine of duty was corollary to his idea of God. He demanded from men toward God inward truth and sincere obedience, and toward men, brotherliness. From within, out of the heart, he sought the character of men. Outward observances were of little moment, even though they were of venerable sanctity.

Of the kingdom of God he had much to say, but more concerning the duties it entails than of the privileges it offers—excepting to the poor in spirit and to the pure in heart. The consummation of the kingdom did not concern his thought so much as the inauguration of it. And that inauguration was shown to be accomplished wherever men sincerely strive to do the will of God. Of the consummation he did, however, have something to say—all intended to impress on his hearers that present faithfulness and simple brotherliness are the ways to prepare for the future blessed inheritance.

3. Jesus sought to attach disciples to himself. At first that appeared to be the easiest of tasks. Multitudes flocked to him as

to John, for the same reason: the proclamation of the approaching kingdom of God. But Jesus taught with a new authority which astonished as well as attracted men. Moreover his teaching found echo in every spiritual heart, and such sought ever to sit at his feet. He early chose a select band from among his followers, "that they might be with him and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:14). These twelve were his closest companions. But great multitudes followed him entranced by his words and deeds. It was in fact his deeds as much as his words that entranced them. There was a simple friendliness, a social joyousness, a divine sympathy, which drew men to him. Moreover his mighty works of help and healing filled the multitudes with expectant enthusiasm. However a scientific age would explain these mighty works, it seems indubitable that Jesus had a marvelous power to help and to heal the sick and distressed.

All these things combined to draw multitudes to him. But he sought not simply eager, expectant followers, but firmly attached disciples. He was fearful of too easy enthusiasm, and with reason. That enthusiasm was eager to *use* Jesus for fulfilment of its hopes and expectations. Those he well knew he could not and would not satisfy. Hence he found it necessary to guard against too great an arousing of popular excitement, and repeatedly he charged some man whom he had helped to tell no one about it.

As time passed, however, the contradiction between Jesus' spiritual teaching and the popular hopes became more and more clear; the conflict between the scribes and Jesus' simple spiritual message became more acute; and the contempt of the rulers for the Nazarene prophet became more chilling and widely felt. And the multitudes began to fall away. Then came the testing time and Jesus proved the attachment of the few to him, whom they acknowledged to have for them the words of eternal life (John 6:68). When the multitudes, who earlier would have eagerly welcomed a chance to proclaim him Messiah, no longer thought of him except as a prophet, Jesus asked the Twelve directly, "Who say ye that I am?" (Mark 8:29). And Peter replied, "Thou art the Messiah." It was faith in the face of surrounding defection and indifference. And Jesus knew that Peter and those for whom

he spoke, had come under his personal sway, and could not only believe, but could serve, his ideal of the kingdom of God.

A few more weeks or months of fellowship and special training followed. Jesus concerned himself more and more with his proved disciples. Then came the end in Jerusalem, the enthusiasm cooling into hatred, the arrest, the trial, the cross. And the hopes of the faithful were crushed, but only to be revived in undying vigor by the glorious surprises of Easter morning.

4. "It is finished" was the cry of Jesus from the cross. What was finished? His task of uttermost obedience, his preaching of a kingdom of God that cometh in obedient hearts, and his creation of a band of disciples now knit to him by love and faith, that death could only stun, not destroy. And that means that he had accomplished the great undertaking, of which he spake in parable—he had planted a seed in the world, which though utterly insignificant in men's eyes, should become a great tree; he had put leaven in the lump of the world's life, which though hidden, should work silently away from public observation, until the whole was leavened.

Such was his undertaking: spiritual, inward, heavenly, like his teaching and like his life.

What he accomplished the next paper will discuss.